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AUTHOR Levant, Ronald F.; Slattery, Susan C.
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ABSTRACT

Recently, the systematic skills approach has been applied to the training of foster parents. A systematic skills training program for foster mothers was evaluated to investigate the relationship between skills training and the outcome of the placement for the child. The sample consisted of inner-city, lower socio-economic minority foster mothers and their foster children. The 10-week training program was eclectic and emphasized personal development as a prerequisite for skill development. The foster children of a group of foster mothers (N=8) trained in the program were compared with those of a no-contact control group (N=6) before and after training with regard to self-esteem, asocialization, emotionality-tension, self-exploration and placement stability. Dependent measures included self-report paper-and-pencil tests, foster parent ratings, independent judge's ratings of videotaped parent-child interactions and objective determination of placement continuation. Children of training group foster mothers improved significantly more than control children on emotionality-tension, but not on other measures. The findings suggest that future research should examine the effects of an extended training program. (Author/NRB)

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The Effects of a Systematic Skills Training Program on the Outcome of Foster Care

Ronald F. Levant[1]
Susan C. Slattery

Running Head: Effects of Training on Foster Care

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1. All correspondence should be sent to Ronald F. Levant, Program in Counseling Psychology, Boston University, 765 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston MA 02215

The Effects of a Systematic Skills Training Program on the Outcome of Foster Care

During the 1960's there was a change in the way nonprofessional human service workers were perceived. Based on an acute awareness of shortages of trained mental health personnel (Albee, 1967), and fueled by the increasing role of the federal government in mental health through the Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1963 and its extensions, the use of nonprofessional personnel was re-evaluated. These workers, who had formerly provided the bulk of institutional custodial care as attendants (Gurin, Veroff and Feld, 1960), were now seen as potentially able (with appropriate selection and training) to provide therapeutic services (Rioch, 1966; Reiff & Reissman, 1965; Reissman, 1967). Concurrently, findings in psychotherapy research seemed to indicate that certain personal attributes of the psychotherapist were more strongly associated with therapy outcome than was extensive academic training (Bergin, 1967; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). These attributes are empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness, posited by Rogers (1957) as the "necessary and sufficient conditions" of effective psychotherapy. These psychotherapy research findings lent support to the movement to upgrade the nonprofessional, and indicated that training programs should be aimed at the enhancement of these therapeutic attributes in the trainees (Carkhuff, 1966). These attributes soon became known as skills, and systematic skills training programs were developed (Carkhuff, 1969; Kagan, Note 4; Ivey, 1971; Danish & Hauer, 1973).

During this period similar developments occurred in the social service field. The role of foster parents -- perhaps the prototypic nonprofessional helper -- was being re-evaluated. Formerly viewed as low-level employees or even as clients of the agency (Glickman, 1967), there were calls to professionalize the foster parent role (House & Koop, 1966; Pratt, 1966; Fanshel, 1970). Training programs were

developed, utilizing group discussion and didactic methods (Hanwell, Mason, Mooney & Thomas, Note 3; Nowak & Reistroffer, Note 7; Stone & Hunzeker, 1974). Most recently, the systematic skills approach has been applied to the training of foster parents (Burchard & Leitenberg, Note 1; L. Guerney, Note 2, 1977).

Despite the early enthusiasm for the training of nonprofessionals in mental health and social service, and in particular for the use of the systematic skills approach, efficacy has yet to be empirically established. Karlsruher (1974) reviewed the evaluative research literature on the effectiveness of nonprofessional mental health workers and concluded that, while nonprofessionals are able to facilitate the improvement of adult inpatients, their efficacy with outpatient adults, adolescents or children has not been established, and their comparative efficacy with professionals has not been adequately investigated. Moreover, the earlier optimistic reports of the efficacy of the systematic skills approach with nonprofessional mental health workers (Carkhuff, 1969, 1972) have been criticized on methodological grounds (Gormally & Hill, 1974; Lambert & DeJulio, 1977). Furthermore, the evaluations of the application of the systematic skills approach to foster parenting have shown mixed results. L. Guerney, using a predominantly white, Protestant, middle-class sample, found training to have positive effects on the foster parents in a pilot study (increased acceptance on the Porter Acceptance Scale, and increased use of desirable responses and decreased use of undesirable responses assessed by written parent responses to hypothetical child situations -- Guerney, 1977). However, in a broader study these results were replicated in one set of training groups but not in another, with no clear reason for this failure to replicate (Guerney, Note 2). And, Burchard & Leitenberg (Note 1) using a high potential foster parent sample found improvement on some measures but not on others in a pilot study.

This article reports the results of an evaluation of a systematic skills

training program for foster mothers. It deals with the second part of a two-part project, in which the relationship between skills training and the outcome of the placement for the child was investigated. The first part focussed on the effects of the training program on the foster mothers' communicational and parenting skills, in order to assess the efficacy of training (Levant & Slobodian, Note 5). The present study compared the foster children of a group of foster mothers trained in the program with those of a no-contact control group pre- and post training with regard to their self-esteem, asocialization, emotionality-tension, self-exploration and placement stability.

Method

Procedure

Foster mothers who volunteered to participate in the study were assigned to the training and control groups based on whether they could attend an afternoon or an evening session. Both groups were pre- and post-tested on the dependent measures at the beginning and end of the training program. The testing procedure involved the foster mother and foster child each filling out their respective paper and pencil tests, and the videotaping of an interaction between foster parent and foster child.

Subjects

The subjects were fourteen* foster children ranging in age from 7 to 17 years, with a mean of 12.0 years. There were 9 girls and 5 boys. All but one of the children were black. They had had an average of 1.7 prior foster care placements, and had been in foster care an average of 2.7 years. No significant differences (.05) were found between the two groups of children on these variables.

The foster mothers were affiliated with an urban regional office of the Massachusetts Department of Public Welfare and/or a private social service agency based in the inner-city. One was white and thirteen were black. Five mothers reported being employed, listing occupations such as day care worker and clerical worker. Three mothers reported being currently married. All of the

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* There were fifteen subjects originally, but one child did not complete the post training measures.

mothers resided in the poorer sections of the inner-city, which are Black or inter-racial, and which are beset by multiple social problems.

Several attributes of foster parents have been found in previous research to be associated with the outcome of placement. Positive placement outcomes have been associated with age of foster parents over 45 years (Trasler, 1960) and familiarity of foster parents with child care (Cautley & Aldridge, 1975). Negative outcomes have been associated with high religiosity and presence of pre-school children in the home (Cautley & Aldridge, 1975). In terms of these criteria the foster parents in this study were of moderately high potential: the mean age was 46.6 years; 85.7% were familiar with child care; 28.6% had pre-school children in the home; and the median religiosity score was 2.29 on a 3-point scale (1=not religious, 2=moderately religious, 3=very religious). No significant differences (.05) were found between the groups on these parent variables.

The Skills Training Program

The training program consisted of ten three hour sessions held weekly. The group was co-led by two advanced doctoral candidates in counseling psychology, who had experience both with skills training and with group work with a lower socio-economic minority population. One was male, the other female. Both were white. The curriculum was developed with the aim of building on prior efforts. In so doing we have borrowed and adapted aspects of a number of existing training models. We have utilized the idea of two stages of skill training (discrimination and communication stages) developed by Carkhuff (1969, 1971). We have followed Ivey (1971; Ivey & Gluckstern, 1974) in the method of developing very specific skills (such as attending), and in the four-step skill

building process (introducing and defining the skill, demonstrating the skill using videotaped and live examples, practicing the skill through role-plays, and transferring the skill to the interaction with foster children through homework assignments). We have borrowed from Kagan's (Note 4) Interpersonal Process Recall Method, adapting it to the problem of developing self-awareness and genuineness skills in foster parents. We have learned a great deal from, and have incorporated aspects of the program developed by Louise Guerney (1977; Note 2), particularly in the sessions on rules, limits and consequences, and structuring. Finally, we have utilized the "no-lose" method of conflict resolution developed by Gordon (1970), adapting it to the foster parenting situation.

While we have borrowed and adapted the work of the above mentioned people, and have been influenced in some way by the work of yet others, this program is more than a collection of existing ideas. It is an adaptation to foster parenting, and an internally coherent integration of what in the authors' judgment represents the best aspects of existing systematic skills training programs. The elements are integrated within our unique frame of reference, in which personal development is seen as the prerequisite for, and foundation of, effective skill development.

The fundamental premise of this training program is that skills are learned and relationships are enhanced only to the extent that one is able to grow as a person. Thus the orientation of many of the sessions is toward examining particular aspects of oneself as a person in order to enhance certain aspects of one's functioning as a foster parent. For example: Foster parents learn to observe their own thoughts and feelings as they emerge in an interpersonal situation in order to enhance their self-awareness and their ability to be more genuine; they examine their personal sensitivities in order to increase their

acceptance of their foster child; and they discuss their personal reactions to the breaking of rules in order to set limits more constructively.

The program includes didactic and experiential components as well as homework exercises contained in the Foster Parents' Workbook. A Leaders' Guide provides a specific session-by-session outline (Levant, Slobodian & Slattery, Note 6). The first five sessions focus on the client-centered communication or helping skills, while the last five cover parenting skills. The helping skills consist of the parent's ability to empathize with the child's experience, to be respectful of that experience, and to be genuine in interactions with the foster child, sharing honestly one's own feelings. The parenting skills consist of the parent's ability to plan ahead and structure situations in order to prevent problems, to confront the child in a caring way with the realities of his/her situation and the options open to him/her, and to resolve conflicts and impasses when they occur. The course outline is displayed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Dependent Variables and Measures

Several different types of dependent measures were utilized, following a strategy of multiple operationism (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz & Sechrest, 1966). Self-esteem and asocialization were assessed by self-report paper-and-pencil tests. Emotionality-tension was assessed by a behavioral rating form filled out by foster parents on their foster children. Self-exploration was assessed

by ratings made by independent judges of videotaped interactions between foster parents and foster children. And placement stability was assessed by an objective determination of the continuation or discontinuation of the placement.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was assessed by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. The Piers-Harris scale (Piers & Harris, 1969) is a brief (under 20 minute) self-report paper-and-pencil test designed to measure the self-esteem of children, ages 8-18. It consists of 80 items which are written as simple declarative sentences, to which the child responds by circling "yes" or "no." Wylie (1974) considers the Piers-Harris scale to be the most promising research tool available for evaluating the self-esteem of children.

Asocialization. Asocialization was assessed by the asocial index of the Jesness Inventory (Jesness, 1966). The Jesness Inventory is a personality inventory for children ages 8-18, consisting of 155 items which are answered "true" or "false." The items cover a range of attitudes and sentiments about self and others developed to provide a basis for a personality typology meaningful for use with both delinquent and nondelinquent populations. The inventory provides scores on 11 personality characteristics, including the asocial index. The asocial index is based on a regression equation which combines attitudinal syndromes and personality traits as assessed by the other scales into an index predictive of delinquency.

Emotionality-tension. Emotionality-tension was assessed by the emotionality-tension scale of the Child Behavior Characteristics Form (Borgatta & Fanshel, 1970). The Child Behavior Characteristics Form (CBC) is a behavior rating scale filled out by the foster parent on the foster child. The CBC was designed to enable the longitudinal study of children from infancy through adolescence. The instrument is based on studies of foster children involved in psychiatric

outpatient clinics, and children in residential treatment centers. It consists of 104 items on which the subject is rated as exhibiting the behavior: "almost always," "often," "sometimes," "rarely" and "never." The specific content is designed for the age spans covering infancy, early childhood (2-6 years), and 7-17 years. Factor analysis has yielded a scoring scheme to emphasize orthogonal content. The items can be summed into 27 component scores and these can be further grouped into 16 composite scores, including the emotionality-tension score. The emotionality-tension score has been chosen for analysis because the authors report that this measure should be given prominence in clinical interpretation.

Self-exploration. Self-exploration was assessed by ratings made by independent judges of videotaped interactions between foster parents and foster children. For this assessment, foster parents and foster children were given two tasks: First they were each asked to think of two relatively minor problems they could discuss with each other for five minutes. For example, the foster parent might dislike the child's leaving the bathroom a mess; the child might think his foster parent makes him go to bed too early. Second, each was asked to think of three things they'd like the other to start doing or stop doing. They were to discuss one of these issues for five minutes. A videotape was made of the interaction which was then rated by two expert raters who did not know if the tape was made pre- or post training and were unaware of the subjects' group identification (training or control).

The raters assessed the child's level of self-exploration using Carkhuff's (1969) scale, Helpee Self-Exploration in Interpersonal Processes: A Scale for Measurement. The dimension of self-exploration has been identified as an indication of helpee progress and is related to the level of functioning of

the helper. In general, it has been found that the higher the level of functioning of the helper on the facilitative dimensions, the higher the helpee's disposition to explore and experience oneself (Carkhuff, 1969). Interjudge reliability using Hoyt's Inter-class R was .97 in the present study.

Placement stability. Placement stability was assessed by an objective determination of whether the placement continued or had broken down at the end of training. Placement stability is a crucial factor since many foster placements break down under stress. Kraus (1971) cited continuation of placement as the "ultimate criterion" indicating success of foster care.

Results

Data from the first four dependent measures (self-esteem, asocialization, emotionality-tension and self-exploration) was analyzed using analysis of covariance with the pretest scores as the covariates. This analysis was chosen because of its ability to test significance after adjusting for initial differences between groups. Thus, it adjusts for what differences may have existed between the training and control group due to assignment to condition based on the time of day that the subject was available instead of randomly.

The results are presented in Table 2. It can be seen that there were no significant differences between the training and control groups in self-esteem, asocialization and self-disclosure. However, children of the training group foster mothers improved significantly more than control group children on emotionality-tension.

Put Table 2 Here

Data from the fifth dependent measure (placement stability) was analyzed separately because it was assessed in nominal data terms, and was constant at pretest time (all children had been successfully continued in their placement for at least two months). At post-training, one (12.5%) of the training group placements and two (33.3%) of the control group placements had broken down. The difference between the groups was not found to be statistically significant using the Fisher Exact Test.

Discussion

The results indicate that children of foster mothers who participated in the training program showed significant improvement relative to control group foster children on emotionality-tension, but not on self-esteem, asocialization, self-disclosure and placement stability. These findings must be viewed within the context of the results of the first aspect of this project, in which the effects of training on foster parents was assessed (Levant & Slobodian, Note 5). That study did not find that the ten session training program was effective in improving the communicational and parenting skills of the foster mothers, as assessed by nine measures (including ratings of videotaped interactions and questionnaires). This casts some doubt on the finding in the present study of significant improvement in the training group children on the emotionality-tension variable.

This positive finding may be spurious. First of all, the small size of the sample limits our ability to generalize from these results. One outlier may skew the group means enough to cause the finding of significant difference when none is actually present. Second, there is the possibility when doing multiple univariate tests that finding significance on one variable is due to chance. Third, the training group children were less tense than the control group children at pre-test (lower scores on the emotionality-tension scale indicate less tension). Although the training group children improved at post test, reducing their scores an average of 2.63 points (whereas the control group children deteriorated slightly at post test, increasing their scores an average of .63 points), this may be due to their lower tension at the beginning. The training group children, being less tense, might have been more likely to improve

over the time-span of the study regardless of whether their foster parents were in training. Although the analysis of covariance procedures adjusts for differences in pre-test levels, it does not rule out this possibility. Fourth, the positive finding might be due to the "thank you effect." Because the purpose of the training was to enhance the foster parent-child relationship, the subjects could have wished to please the trainers by indicating progress on the one measure of the children they filled out. This would be hard to do intentionally because the passage of twelve weeks would mean there would be little memory of initial responses. The large number of items would also mitigate against attempting to please. A more favorable mind set could cause a more positive assessment however. A fifth factor would be the expectation of benefits. If the foster parents felt that they had benefited from training, this may have influenced their filling out the assessment of the foster child on emotionality-tension.

The positive findings might also reflect actual changes in the children or in the parent-child relationship. In support of this, it was found in the first study that the greatest improvement in foster parent skills was on conflict resolution ($F_{(1,12)} = 1.71$; $p = .22$); and, in the present study, children's emotionality-tension scores showed a significant correlation coefficient with foster mothers' conflict resolution skills ($r_s = .59$; $p < .05$).

While the precise reasons behind the improvement on the emotionality-tension variable are not clear, it is evident that the foster parents in the experimental group were perceiving the children as better behaved. It may be that the foster children in the experimental group were actually behaving better in response to more adaptive behavior on the part of the foster parents.

In general, this study did not find that systematic skills training had

demonstrably positive effects on the outcome of foster care. The fact that the sample for this study was drawn from an urban poor population is significant in assessing results. Most skills training prior to this has been done with middle class populations. Implementing the ideas with the working/welfare class was frequently cited as the next arena for researchers. One goal of this study was to explore the feasibility of such training with a lower SES population. Our foster mothers were very highly motivated women who genuinely cared about their foster children. At the end of training their interpersonal skills had not changed significantly in spite of their consistent, enthusiastic attendance.

The major factor operating here is that many mothers in the sample had tremendous life stresses to deal with that often encrouched on class time and interfered with the planned course of instruction. The press of individual needs, noted as a problem by Bendix (1977) in her work with middle class families was very much in evidence in this study. Common-sense dictates that an individual cannot be available to care for another when her basic survival needs are not being met. The results of this project indicate that prolonged training is necessary in this situation. Whereas middle class mothers are difficult to engage for longer than 10 weeks, the foster mothers were eager for on-going training. Time must be allocated for dealing with individual concerns; this would in turn allow trainers time to have the group practice a skill until it was mastered, using more adept students to teach those having more difficulty, rather than having to move on to the next skill when a fair number of group members were still quite tenuous about current skills.

There are also particular characteristics of the foster children which may have had a profound effect on the study. While acknowledging that the foster children, having undergone major losses, were in need of long-term, intensive

care before major changes in their mental status would be evidenced, it was hoped that some movement in the direction of psychological health would be observable. At the inception of the study, the foster children were scoring in the range of identified problem children in self-esteem, asocialization, and emotionality-tension. Because the foster children were more disturbed than average children, the likelihood of effecting significant change was less than that to be expected with a more normal population, particularly with the limited amount of time available in this study.

To summarize and conclude, the question of whether systematic skills training can be effective in enhancing foster care in lower socio-economic homes remains open. The experience in this study would indicate that future research should utilize an extended training program, both because of needs and life circumstances of the foster mothers and because of the degree of disturbance of the foster children.

Table 1

Course Outline for Personal Developmental
Foster Parent Skills Training Program

Part I: Communication Skills	Part II: Parenting Skills
1. Attending	6. Acceptance
2. Listening and Responding I: Content	7. Structuring
3. Listening and Responding II: Feelings	8. Rules, Limits and Consequences
4. Speaking for Oneself I: Self-awareness	9. Conflict Resolution
5. Speaking for Oneself II: Genuineness	10. Integration: Skilled Foster Parenting

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Training and Control Groups in the Pre-training and Post-training Child Measures

	Groups								
	Training (N = 8)				Control (N = 6)				
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		
Child Measure[a]	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	F[b]
Self-Esteem	52.63	14.32	58.38	10.11	50.83	14.72	58.00	10.16	.05
Asocialization	55.00	7.01	63.00	7.98	61.50	9.38	52.50	17.62	1.82
Emotionality-Tension	25.88	8.22	23.25	3.45	29.87	8.26	30.50	4.04	10.83*
Self-Disclosure	2.81	1.19	2.00	1.16	2.08	.92	2.08	.86	.72

[a] Improvement is measured by an increase on Self-Esteem and Self-Disclosure, and by a decrease on Asocialization and Emotionality-Tension

[b] d.f. = 1, 11, one way analysis of covariance with pre-training scores as covariantes

* $p < .01$

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